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AUTHOR Macpherson, R. J. S.  
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## ABSTRACT

Many of the arguments in the Victoria Department of Education, Australia, against the involvement of school councils in the selection of principals are based on careerism, opportunism, and protectionism. To move away from the lock-step adherence to the values that lead to accession by seniority requires the application of democratic methods. School councils in Victoria should exercise the responsibility and right to determine what is best for the children of their constituency. Experiences in New Zealand and Scotland show the benefits of local participation in school governance. The pluralism of Australia, backed by the values of equity and democracy, ensures that a wide range of criteria will be used in attracting and appointing principals. (MLF)

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VALUES AND ASSUMPTIONS IN CONTESTATION OVER SCHOOL COUNCILS  
SELECTING PRINCIPALS

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R J.S. Macpherson

R.J.S. Macpherson,  
Lecturer in Educational Administration,  
Monash University

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Arguments being made by some principals in the Victorian Department of Education against the involvement of school councils in the selection of principals must be challenged. For nearly two years it has been my privilege to conduct ethnographic research (Macpherson, 1982) in three regions of Victoria, and to meet many principals in a wide range of settings. Reflecting on what I recall of the attitudes and feelings of their counterparts in other countries it seems that some might usefully reconsider their fundamental purposes as educational administrators, and relate their answers to their stance on community service and local selection of principals. To help in this, I briefly describe below two alternative approaches to assist discussion of assumptions and thus the exploration of some of the fundamental values involved.

I must preface what follows by emphasizing that the positions taken by many principals I have met as being philosophically educational, and simultaneously compatible with the thrust of Ministerial Papers 1 and 4 (Fordham, 1983a, 1983b). These principals have enjoyed for many years the benefits that such an approach brings.

The aim of this appraisal is to suggest there are greater principles at stake than careerism, opportunism, and protectionism. We need to identify with some clarity the key values of selection criteria and processes, and take a philosophical stand on the relative merit on each principle in order to guide the process. To this end I will examine the forms of argument some groups use. Though none of the examples given are the words of any particular person, all represent arguments I have heard on many occasions in the course of the research mentioned above.

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## THE NATURE OF THE DISCOURSE

The first argument I challenge is that which attacks the qualifications and expertise of the people who suggest any new scheme. Example: 'What does - - - know about running a school, anyway?' This argument is not logical for it adds nothing to the specificity or relevance of the terms used, nor addresses the adequacy of the proposal, and therefore adds nothing to an educational appraisal of the issue itself: selection processes and criteria. It merely attacks the proponent, not the ideas in the proposal. Another argument is often mixed in, i.e., that specific expertise and wisdom derivable only from that experience within that occupation, is required to judge an applicant's qualifications and training. This self-serving and circular argument simply confines the choice of selection criteria within the assumptions of the ideology currently held. An adjunct to this closed logic is commitment to a centralized (and universal?) process that proposes to easily render personal attributes to measurable and thus comparable variables. The result is implausibility due to the excessive reductionism involved.

There is also the emotional use of unjustified assumptions about the attitudes of those proposing any alternative scheme. For instance, 'You know what Federation and VICCSO are saying, don't you?' Typically the arguments are self-derogatory constructions, often allusions to one's own interest group being regarded as untrustworthy, lacking in integrity, unprofessional, i.e., attacks on the key elements of the group's self-esteem. This is intended to create a climate of distrust, and to prepare the way for emotional manipulation. Sometimes these arguments refer to another organization's published literature or conference resolutions. Such quasi-citation does not necessarily enjoy the status of sufficient evidence; the conclusion may well go well beyond it in scope.

Another type of argument raises the prospect that joint action by another interest groups may be threatening to all principals. Example: 'If these parents get the Minister's ear to the extent the Unions have ...' Thus conspiracies are constructed and sustained in the minds of an audience. Such arguments are characterized by proper nouns becoming epithets, and generalizations being mounted on incidents.

One strong avenue for appeal these days is to seek special dispensation for those regarded as disadvantaged. I have heard propositions of this kind: 'As rural children are disadvantaged, then rural schools' leaders deserve preferential treatment for service above and beyond the call of duty'. The idea is to 'piggy-back' a grievance, in order to create exceptions to (and thus incrementally dismantle) any policy based on egalitarianism or positive discrimination. The values underpinning this approach are neither educational nor humanitarian. They appear to be related rather to a willingness to use others' misfortunes to gain advantage.

Less subtle are responses to the 'best applicant' principle which seek to link it with other current issues by highlighting supposedly common dangers. 'You saw what happened when they killed off the Divisions!' These are broadly classifiable as arguments of confusion, intended to curry sentiments of doubt and fear, rather than confidence. The result is not a conceptual clarity of issues and intentions, but an emotional reaction against the new, the unknown or the problematical. A popular tactic is to raise and then destroy a proposition based on yesterday's assumptions. Example: 'Do we really want the shambles created in America when the P.T.A.s took over schools?' Such strawmen should be recognized as cultural artefacts of past experience that deny the existence of human ingenuity and progress, and thus closely appraised as expressions of interests and purposes or as portrayals of the promoter's view of his audience.

How many principals persist in reporting that 'My parents are just not interested'? The argument that a school's council neither has nor will show any interest in the governance of the school, is probably not only the self-serving statement of a gatekeeper, but also a denial of the principal's responsibility to facilitate and empower others in local educational democracy. (Fordham, 1983b:6) Perhaps on closer self-examination a principal might concede that he lacks the skills to do this: a highly likely situation, given 110 years' suppression of these skills. One aspect of the conceptual legacy is that consultancy is generally held to an implementation and content orientated role, whereas the Ministerial Papers patently imply consultancy to be primarily concerned with process facilitation.

On the other hand, I have much sympathy with the reciprocal argument, to do with responsibility i.e., that if a principal is to be held responsible for pedagogy in the school, then teachers should be accountable to him and in some degree be selected by him. Perhaps the saddest assertion is that 'We should not disadvantage those who got to where they are under the old rules'. Is this an argument about wishing to be elsewhere, demoted, or about preserving anticipated advantages so long nurtured as aspiration, despite the absence of any legitimating rationale? Is the argument an admission that although these 'old rules' were unjust, a bridging phase into new rules is needed to shore up self-esteem? Or does this argument mask an earlier acceptance of inferior locations in order to attain promotion at the earliest opportunity, and the need now to sustain the 'old' processes and criteria to enable settlement into a more favoured schools closer to (say) a major community resource? Is it evidence of square pegs in round holes?

As I noted above, we need to clarify the values underpinning arguments about selection criteria and processes. Other more decentralized systems use different priorities and mechanisms.

## THE NEW ZEALAND EXPERIENCE

A thorough appraisal of how an educational system with a very comparable culture and educational ideology to Victoria's manages to appoint principals as a school-based exercise, was that conducted by Dobell (1980). He found there that school governance was in the hands of an elected local body who had, since early colonial times, exercised the right to choose the best available applicant. My own experience in New Zealand suggested the system was highly acceptable to professionals, for it enshrined three forms of equity. Victorian principals can also quite properly anticipate equity of opportunity to practice, to promotion on merit (as defined by each school's community), and to serve others by offering the best possible facilitative and empowering leadership.

In each school I taught in there was an articulated and shared philosophy. Colleagues responded confidently to the key question about values - what does this school stand for? It was made clear to me very early in my service that clients had the right (indeed duty) to press for answers on curriculum pedagogy and evaluation. As any dissonance tended to be probed, an early task for the new appointee was to appreciate the philosophy of the culture(s) that underpinned the formal and informal curriculum of the school.

My experience suggests that New Zealand principals would be baffled by the centralism explicit in recent moves to establish an Appointment Board, especially the giving away of local rights to 'Classifiers'. They would ask why is that some Victorian principals argue that selection expertise is not available locally, when most other local community services' governing bodies appoint professionals. Experience has taught them the benefits of intergrating their professionalism with local aspiration. They have far less loyalty conflict, employed as they are by their school's governing board, only paid by the Department of Education. The next question is then, how might a school council act as an appointment board?

## AN ENGLISH EXPERIENCE

Whilst teaching in Scotland, a system as independant as each English county or Australian state is, an advertisement in the internationally read weekly, the Times Educational Supplement, caught my attention. It briefly indicated the philosophy and location of the school, the responsibilities and salary of a soon-to-be vacant departmental headship, and sought basic details from applicants. My written response was sufficiently attractive to the Board of Governors' Executive for my name (with about twenty others) to go on to a 'long list' and thus for me to be invited to submit a more detailed application on specified lines. The Board of Governors deliberated and, using the advertised appointment criteria rigorously, narrowed the list down to a 'short list' of six. Subsequent involvement in appointing others indicated to me that other factors played a comparatively minor part in short listing. The cost involved in bringing in and accommodating a distant applicant is a good example. The Governors were above all committed to getting the 'best' applicant, and budgeted accordingly.

The Board of Governors appointed a selection panel. From memory I recall it had the Principal as the voting executive officer, the Board Chairman as chairman, another elected Governor, a Head of Department representing staff, and a Local Education Officer representing the county. I believe the Chairman, the Principal, and the L.E.O. each had reserve veto powers, and that there were re-advertisement and alternative County appointment processes in reserve, but in six years I never heard of them being used, nor of any appeals being made to County Hall.

On a Monday the short-listed applicants were given an induction to the school which emphasized its philosophy, strategic plans, and operational structure and processes. After our first interviews on Tuesday, one candidate voluntarily withdrew. I was told later that she felt she could not whole-heartedly support the school's policy on pastoral care. The

remaining five were then given free access to staff and school activities, and a desk in the staff preparation suite to prepare for the second interview on Friday. At that interview I presented my analysis of the appointee's task, cognizant of the school's policy and resource limits, and the detail of how I proposed to carry out that role.

Three years after appointment I was seconded to Reading University for a year, but before departing was elected by staff to help with the appointment of my replacement. While on secondment I applied for and gained one of the five headships in the same very large comprehensive, but by the same exacting process. It seems in retrospect to have been a widely accepted procedure that not only selected the best applicant (as perceived locally), but also generated social and professional contracts between community and staff. In marked contrast to Victoria, the process itself is hardly ever questioned. Instead I recall deep and lengthy discussions about what was to be published as 'our philosophy' and selection criteria. I wish that on Victorian school communities.

#### SUMMARY

Many of the arguments used against involving particular local people in the selection of principals are fallacious. Some derive their strength from personal application, not logical reasoning, others seek to prove not the point to be established, but something like it, others again appeal to passions and prejudices. None of these kinds of argument should be admissible in educational debate.

I would suggest that discussion consider the importance and meaning of equity, democracy, and pluralism. Equity interests not only me as the principle guiding the allocation of resources (staff, facilities, budgets, etc) but as an insistence that educational success is a birthright to be equally enjoyed. Mounting evidence (e.g., Connell et al., 1982) suggests that education in Australia serves to suppress and select rather than

liberate and enlighten our young. The question then arises: what purposes are to be served by the work of educational administrators? I have argued elsewhere (Macpherson, 1983) that well-led schools could get richer as localism prevails. How might we move away from the lock-step adherence to the values that lead to accession by seniority, determination of the status of schools by type and size, differentiation of education allowances by student age, and so on?

Democracy is the political process we use to manage a society grown too complex to govern by arbitrary rule (Crick, 1963). School councils in Victoria are to be reconstituted with the responsibility and right to determine what is best for the children of their constituency (Fordham, 1983b). I would argue that the money involved, though processed by public servants, belongs primarily and rightfully to parents to spend, for example, in attracting and appointing 'best' applicants. Principals should not assume that one ideal type of principal will be universally promotable - indeed the pluralism of Australian society should ensure that a wide range of criteria will be used. For educational administrators to respond to the pluralistic complexities of Australian society implies accepting site-by-site definitional variance of what constitutes the 'best applicant'. Educational administrators have a moral responsibility not to interfere with, but rather to facilitate, the democratic process in criteria formulation (Macpherson, 1983). Their role is to provide considered advice, to empower others, but not to arbitrate or decide. The line is fine, I concede, but it is worthy of much considered reflection.

To conclude, I urge Victorian principals to reflect on the centralist and careerist assumptions implicit in much of the current discourse, to examine their position in terms of equity, democracy and pluralism, and to relate the principles inherent in any stand they take to educational and social values.

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